

PREFACE

My introduction to hobby games was, without a doubt, *Magic: The Gathering*. I had played *Dungeons & Dragons* with my cousin and friends, but for whatever reason the game never got its hooks in me quite like *Magic* did. Sure I played both, but the collectable aspect of *Magic* encouraged me to seek out new stores, new people to play with, and new magazines and web forums to learn from. The game showed me how deep one could fall into hobby games and the intricate networks that would eagerly support and encourage this.

I grew up mixed (half Black and half Jewish) in the white suburbs of New Jersey near the Quick Stop that Kevin Smith would make famous in 1994's *Clerks*. Although race rarely became an explicit conversation among me and my peers, it was something that the other kids at school would frequently ask me about. To them, I looked exotic, vaguely ethnic with my goofy fro and golden skin. I also wore glasses because I had a crossed eye from a botched surgery in my youth. So, yeah . . . I was a nerd. My friends and I would cluster together during lunch, forming a barricade between us and the other kids in the room. Here we made a safe space to disappear into our fantasies and play *Magic* with one another safe from the teasing eyes of the rest of our peers.

The story above, although my own, is also somewhat common. Hobby games becoming a refuge for nerdy kids is somewhat of a trope. Paul Feig devoted an episode of 1999's *Freaks and Geeks* to it, it is the conceit of the infamous 1982 Tom Hanks vehicle *Mazes and Monsters*, and it has even been explored in a 2011 episode of *Community* (that has been since removed from *Netflix* and *Hulu* due to the use of Blackface). For many nerdy kids, hobby games are a lifeline—a space of belonging set apart from the bullying and turbulent dynamics they encounter in their day-to-day lives. Getting through middle school meant doubling down on the hobby games I enjoyed most—getting lost in the pictures, stories, and strategies that surrounded *Magic*.

My interest in *Magic* catapulted me into a variety of spaces. I would attend tournaments with my friends at local hobby stores and college campuses. With friends and family I would seek out hobby shops when traveling to other towns—the Compleat Strategist in New York City and Head Games in Princeton. Even though I was a shy kid, I could get over my bashfulness in order to make friends, play games, and trade cards with the players hanging around these shops. I came to understand intuitively that hobby games were more than the cards that we played with. Instead, they were the networks of people I met along the way. I remember how my interest in hobby games slowly transitioned into a social interest in communicating with others who were also participating in the scene.

For all of the amazing friends I made playing *Magic* as a kid, there were some things that I had to deliberately ignore to persevere in these networks. I have a visceral reaction still today when I remember the awkward pauses in conversation that would follow the casual racism in conversation. My blood ran cold whenever the conversations around me would use coded language like “urban” and “ghetto” to discriminate against the kind of person who wasn’t welcome in the space. Welcome as I may have been, it was wholly contingent on my ability to engage in white-passing behavior. To some extent I internalized this hatred. Despite my participation, I never felt like I truly belonged in these communities. Even though hobby games remained my space of refuge, I also felt like an outsider in the hobby communities I inhabited.

This book explores, in large part, this simple contradiction. It illustrates how geek culture is the product of both racial and class-based segregation in America. I explain how white flight defined the contours of the networks that hobbyists moved within and how clumsy and often unintentional microaggressions kept minoritized people out. Despite this, these networks were tremendously supportive for the geeks who inhabited them. They were genuine spaces of refuge that supported the folks who moved within them. Even in urban spaces, geeks operated as apostles of white suburban culture—they developed enclaves where they could socialize within their networks unfettered.

In high school and college I all but abandoned hobby games. I came to recognize the hurtful aspects of the cultures of white masculinity that pervaded the network. Even though I still enjoyed many of the games I

had grown to love, I saw myself distinctly as an outsider window shopping in a community that would always be somewhat hostile to me, my friends, and my family. No event portended this; I just grew away from the scene and sought community elsewhere.

I have endeavored to write this book with the utmost appreciation and respect for the hobby communities that I came up in. Although I am largely critical of the white masculine culture that these communities have incubated, this criticism comes from a place of love, understanding, and care. I hope that readers of this book find the history that unfolds within it both evenhanded and fair as I explain how the white identity of hobbyists was constructed over the course of the twentieth century and why the hobby game community's present push to diversify is so exciting.

At the very least, I hope this book helps some other goofy kid feel more welcome in the hobby networks of tomorrow.

